

# I want to break free

Flexible working in the public sector: survey results



Photograph: Alamy

Flexible living - where, when and how we manage our lives digitally - has driven dramatic growth in purchases of smartphones and tablets. It has personalised the way we watch TV and increased engagement with major public events like the Olympics, and encouraged collaborating with others via social media.

Now imagine your typical working day in the public sector in 2016. By then we will have

further improved the way we combine smart devices, mobile broadband connectivity and WIFI and find more intuitive and appealing ways of engaging with content to run our lives.

But what appetite is there for change to public sector working practices? And what challenges must be overcome if the benefits to the government, the taxpayer and the employee are to be realised?



## The survey

Guardian Professional, in association with Vodafone, commissioned an online survey of public sector attitudes to flexible working in the public sector – the where, when and how we work – and expectations of change between now and 2016. Guardian Professional asked Ellare and Insight Oxford to provide an independent analysis and report of the results from the 2500+ responses.

Over half the survey respondents have worked in their current public sector organisation for more than five years, and another quarter had joined within the past five years from other parts of the public sector. This means that the survey represents a large amount of “public sector memory” that has lived through many initiatives and programmes.

*“My staff satisfaction has increased with flexible working and productivity is higher”*

## Executive summary

The survey showed its participants in strong agreement that the way the public sector works in 2016 will be very different from the way it is now. Well over half the respondents agreed that there would be fewer buildings, more sharing of buildings, more sharing of desks, and a far smaller percentage of people (72% today, down to 45% in 2016) working more than half their time at a fixed office location.

Different kinds of flexible working are already widely available, for example, part-time working, flexi-hours, job sharing and home working. Survey replies showed that this flexibility is generally welcomed, with sub-20% levels of disagreement about benefits such as attracting better staff and retaining key staff. Respondents also dispelled some of the "traditional management style" objections to flexible working, with fewer than one in four agreeing that flexible working adversely affects team dynamics or increasing time spent monitoring individual performance. At the same time, there must be a balance between working remotely and being present in the office:

*"Hotdesking devalues workers and often there are not enough desks for social workers. Social workers need to be with their team especially during times of high stress, or times that support is needed, for example after the removal of a child. It can be very traumatising to return to the office after a particularly stressful visit to find that you cannot be supported by your team who know how you are feeling and can offer support."*

More flexible working is just one of the major changes underway in the public sector. Over 85% of respondents said the budget cuts and austerity measures have already brought about changes that are transforming the way that public sector organisations work. At the same time, the majority of respondents believe that transformation programmes are generally in the early stages, with only 27% saying that programmes were complete or implemented. Over two-thirds declared their full support for strategic change.

Annexes 1-5 contain details of the responses to five of the major themes discussed in the survey. Guardian Professional also has published an infographic that illustrates the results from some of the key questions under each theme. Change relies on a willingness to work closely with those actually delivering the front-line services, to use new technology – as long as it works reliably and is simple to use – and to have the right training. A selection of quotes shows how strongly respondents felt on these matters:

*"Mobile working has benefits, but so does spending time in the office with colleagues"*

*"Average age of public sector folk means we need a bit of hand-holding with new tech"*

*"Don't let the tail wag the dog. Shape the technology round the service, not vice-versa"*

*"There is a triple dividend from mobile working: less cost, easier to get info, less stress"*

*"Listen to the people who actually deliver the services"*

*"Don't reinvent the wheel by taking it apart and putting it back together inexpertly"*

*"Digitising wasteful activities doesn't make them any less wasteful"*

*"Don't roll out old policies with a new name, be innovative"*

## Conclusions

### Moving towards the public sector office of 2016

The debate over flexible working is an active one all over the world. Yahoo is about to implement a ban on home working, starting in June 2013. The internal memo from the HR director, on behalf of the new chief executive, says that, "To become the absolute best place to work, communication and collaboration will be important, so we need to be working side-by-side. That is why it is critical that we are all present in our offices."

At the other end of the spectrum, in the UK, based on previous work with Insight Oxford, The Law Society now has a Flexible Working Protocol. The Protocol specifically aims, "To ensure the long term retention of both male and female lawyers, legal practices need to understand and incorporate flexible working into the fabric and culture of the business"

Whichever route is chosen, the Guardian Professional survey, in association with Vodafone, shows that the public sector has an appetite for major change; to how, where and when work is done. However, change must be part of a clearly designed and articulated strategy, created with the front-line worker in mind, strike a balance between remote working and a team environment, and be supported by high quality programme management and training. This is best summarised by a final quote:

*"Invest in your staff, please don't assume the private sector has all the answers."*

# Themes

The survey covered five themes that make change easier or harder in any organisation, not just the public sector. Annexes 1-5 cover them in more detail, recognising that there are significant overlaps and interactions between the themes:

- 1. Space** - how will the use of office buildings and desks change?  
Where will we work?
- 2. People** - what is the culture and appetite for change? Does flexible working have an effect on the quality of people recruited and retained?
- 3. Process** - how much strategic change is happening already and how much progress has been made? What flexibility is there already in the way the public sector works?
- 4. Technology** - how can it best be harnessed and who should it be focussed on?
- 5. Financial** - what is the impact already of cuts and austerity measures? Are these helping or hindering major strategic change?

# Theme 1

## Space

Respondents expect the definition of “the office” to be very different in 2016. Nearly three-quarters work more than half their time today at a fixed location, and only one in seven spends more than half their time working “nomadically”, that is at some other location (though not necessarily at an oasis).

Despite this current clear majority of “fixed” workers, the survey showed a strong acceptance that by 2016 the location, the nature of the building itself or the desks in the building will be very different. By then more than half the respondents expect to be working more than half their time away from a fixed location.

Although respondents perceive a shift towards nomadic working, respondents did not believe this would be the norm for everyone. Respondents estimated that just 6% of staff in their organisation now “worked anywhere” for more than half their time, and that this would increase to 17% by 2016. At the same time, the percentage of people not working nomadically at all was expected to drop from 32% now to 20% in three years’ time.

60% of respondents agreed that the majority of staff would not have an allocated desk in 2016 because of a higher ratio of staff per desk, more sharing of buildings, more selling of redundant buildings and fewer buildings.

“Give local managers the power to collaborate and share buildings”

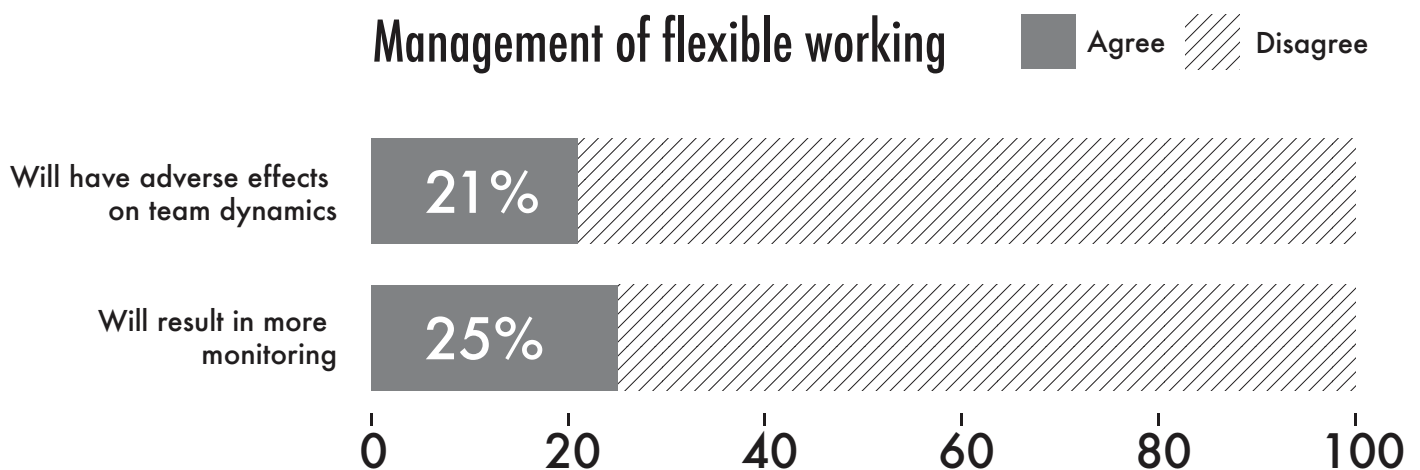
## Theme 2 People

Respondents expressed strong support for executing a programme / strategy for change, with two-thirds saying they would “embrace it wholeheartedly”, and only 1 in 100 saying they would do their “utmost to retain the status quo”.

On specific questions of flexible working, the survey results showed 80% believing that it can improve staff members’ work-life balance, 70% felt it helps their organisation retain key staff, and nearly 60% that their organisation is able to attract better candidates for vacancies. Replies on absenteeism were more neutral, with 42% agreeing, whereas 41% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Only four in ten felt that service delivered to citizens actually improved because of flexible working, but over 45% neither agreed nor disagreed, so levels of disagreement were low.

Levels of agreement on “traditional management style” techniques being affected by flexible working were low – only 25% agreed that team dynamics are adversely affected, and less than 25% that flexible working increases the time required for monitoring individual performance.





## Theme 3

### Process

Questions on “process” covered when and how strategic change has been implemented, and if/how flexible working is currently used. Nearly two-thirds of respondents said that their organisation had articulated a corporate strategy, such as a service transformation programme, but the question as to how far it had been implemented showed that such strategies and programmes are far from complete.

Only 6% said it had now been implemented; and a further 20% said they had almost fully implemented it. 54% replied that they are in the early stages of implementing it or are making small but decisive changes towards this strategy.

Respondents were invited to say what message they would give to the Cabinet Office to transform the public sector. These showed a level of willingness to embrace changes and, at the same time, a level of frustration that those most affected by changes – ie those in front-line roles, are not always consulted during the planning and testing of new ways of working.

The survey results stressed that most options for flexible working are widely available today in the public sector, including part-time working, flexi-time around core hours, job sharing and working from home. Less common were compressed hours, phased retirement and annualised hours.



## Theme 4

### Technology

The survey showed very positive perceptions of technology and its potential to deliver efficiencies and enable change, with such views at the same time being grounded in reality. 85% agreed that technology “is OK as long as it works”, 85% agreed that it can deliver efficiencies, and 85% also agreed that it is an enabler or change. Fewer than 1 in 20 respondents disagreed with any of these three statements.

62% of respondents confirmed that they were seeking innovation from partners and technology providers, and three-quarters said they would have to re-evaluate their communications infrastructure in order to have more staff working away from a fixed location.

Having technology and systems that would support staff working away from a fixed location also would have impacts on training and data security. Over 80% agreed that there would be a need for more staff training on using mobile devices and software applications. Similarly over 80% saw this generating a need to pay closer attention to data security.



## Theme 5

### Financial

Public sector funding cuts have already started to have a large impact on change programmes. Over 86% of respondents said that changes have been implemented, in the light of the cuts, that have transformed or will transform the way they or their organisations work.

70% of organisations have at least 10% less funding than three years ago, with 43% of these now receiving less than 75% of their previous funding. One in five respondents did not know how levels of funding in their organisation had changed.

The comments expressed frustration at continued inefficiencies in the management of change programmes.

“Stop councils from putting social workers in charge of multi-million pound IT then hiring expensive consultants who know nothing about how the system works”

## Methodology

The online survey, which is the basis of this research, went out to the entire Guardian Professional public sector audience. It was released on 26th February 2013, and closed on 12th March. 2,557 people started this survey and 1,473 completed it. This is a completion rate of nearly 60%.

Caveats about the survey: self-selecting, registered with Guardian Professional, 90% of respondents worked in England, the rest in other parts of the UK. Three-quarters had worked in the public sector for at least five years, either in their current organisation or having transferred from another public sector organisation. 27% worked in a County Council / Metropolitan Borough / London Borough / Unitary Authority; 17% in the NHS; 15% in Social Care Services, 13% in a Housing Association. No other organisation accounted for more than 10% of respondents. There was a fairly even split between those who had responsibility for managing staff (mostly 1-50) and those who did not.

As well as specific answers to the 28 questions in the survey, respondents could add their own comments about changes past, present and future. The report is dotted with some of these quotes.



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